

Priorities

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Summary: As Reach burns, the UNSC forces are scrambling to evacuate to their best efforts. With New Alexandria all but empty, forces deem it necessary to begin pulling out of the city. Gunnery Sergeant Edward Buck has other plans.

1. Chapter 1

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"_Command. This is Gunnery Sergeant Buck, Eleventh ODST.
Over._"

"_Copy, Gunnery Sergeant. Go ahead._"

"_My guys got caught in a firefight in the Nomolos Towerâ€"roof collapsed. I gotta get over there and get them out._"

"_Solid copy. Noble Six will escort your Falcon to the tower._"

GySgt Edward Buck

New Alexandria, Eposz

August 2552 1920 Hours

Cold rain peppered Gunnery Sergeant Buck's black clad armor with a harmless, yet vicious _pit_. Punishing wind rocked the Falcon gunship as he overlooked the city ruins from the side. The orange glow of fire in the distance seemed to have its light sucked away as another

Covenant Cruiser fired its excavation beam. The brilliant flash reflected in Buck's visor before fading away and the ambient illumination of distant fire and cracks of lightning were once again given darkness to fill.

"_Lock and load!"_ cackled the zealous voice of Warrant Officer Vega through the speakers in the sergeant's helmet. _"We're heading right into the thick!"_

Without speaking a word of reply, Buck rotated the mounted M247H into place and yanked back the charging handle. The rain hit even harder as the Falcon rocked into motion, its turboprop engines rumbling as their thrust supplemented the rotors' lift. A moment later, the skyscraper they were parked on was replaced by the stormy abyss below, prompting Buck to grip the turret handles tighter.

"_Banshees! Twelve o'clock high!"_

The bandits were out of Buck's reach by a few mere degrees. "I got 'em! Angle left!"

The Falcon yawed to the left, slowly but surely fitting the first bandit right into the jaws of the .50 caliber bite. Bright tongues of fire illuminated Edward's side of the gunship, his low light VISR setting nearly blinding him as it tried to keep track of the withering target beyond the muzzle flash.

The barrage of fire stripped the Banshee clean, leaving almost nothing left but a smoking frame that plunged, spiraling into the stormy abyss below. "One down!" Edward called out while acquiring the second flyer. Before he could squeeze the trigger, M638 Autocannon fire lit up the alien craft from the corner of his eye. He followed the tracers back to the source: a second UH-144 gunship, loaded for bear with a gunner mounted on either side.

The combined fire from the single gunship pummeled the Banshee's armor, forcing it to buckle and then burst into a flash of blue and white like holiday pyrotechnics. _"Escort's here,"_ the pilot called out. _"Repeat: Noble Six is on station. Watch your two o'clock, Gunny."_

"Thanks for the update," Buck said as he watched one of Six's gunners give him a wave across their formation. "Well, that was fast."

"_More bansheesâ€"six o'clock!"_

By the time Buck swung the turret around, Noble Six had already engaged, sharply yawing 180 degrees and lighting up the incoming bandits with all three mounted guns. Within seconds, the threats were eliminated.

"Noble's got 'em," Buck confirmed. "Splash two."

Just then, a volley of plasma splashed against the Falcon's tail, searing off some of the paneling. The resulting spots in Buck's vision impeded him as he tried to trace the shots back to the source, firing through the flashes of plasma clouds. He could hear the pilot cursing, demanding a location on the target.

"AA turrets!" Buck shouted in reply. "Dive! Get below the towers!"

The Falcon pitched downward, plummeting faster than the time it took for the plasma shells to reach them in time. Buck was only thankful that the turret's operator wasn't smart enough to lead his shots, giving him the time and visibility he needed to retire him with a five second stream of .50 caliber fire.

"Hoorah!" Buck cheered.

"_Don't celebrate just yet, Gunnery. More of 'em at twelve and eleven o'clock, both high and low."_

Grabbing hold of the safety handle above, the Gunnery Sergeant unhesitatedly hopped from the starboard turret and hauled himself to the M247H on the port side for a better view. Between the rows of towers and skyscrapers was a narrow path to Nomolos Tower, which was marked clearly by an array of Covenant AA turrets. Until they reached the mile of clear airspace, however, the two Falcons would be dealing with a mass of fuel rods acting as flak.

"Aw nutsâ€|"

"_We're gonna have to go around."_

"Negative. No time."

"_That's too much heat for two birds, Gunnery."_

"Stay lowâ€"don't stop for a second. We've come too far to think twice."

"_Shitâ€|Alright, hold onto your helmet. This is gonna get choppy."_

Standard Operating Procedure for dealing with a citywide glassing was typically to cut losses, turn the opposite direction of the Covvies' excavation beams and grab anyone you can on your way out. By the time the first carrier loomed overhead, it was only a matter of time before the city was bathed in plasma by half a fleet. New Alexandria wasn't the first time the Gunnery Sergeant witnessed this kind of punishment first-hand andâ€"contrary to his hopesâ€"probably wouldn't be the last.

For Eddy Buck, SOP was thrown out the window the moment his squad got on the wires. They hardly needed to say anything over the sounds of gunfire and breaking glassâ€"all it took was five seconds of broken chatter and the Gunnery Sergeant was committed. "Team takes priority" was his policy no matter the orders, no matter the odds, and it was fueling him the whole way; every time he fired his weapon, every time he stared into the beams of focus-fired plasma and the despair that followed. That kind of human elementâ€"that persistent loyaltyâ€"was a danger that the Covenant underestimated greatly, even as they were showered in .50 caliber hate.

One by one, the Covenant Anti-Air batteries crumbled, withered, and burst as the two-Falcon formation spearheaded its way past swarms of molten blue mass and superheated fuel rods. A sudden jolt caused Buck

to curse when he nearly lost control of his turret. "Keep 'er steady, Vega!"

"_Hard to take lead when these bastards keep stepping on her toes, Gunny! We can't take muchâ€"shit! Launchers! Right side! Right side! Coming out on the balcony!"_

As if on cue, a barrage of fuel rods skimmed past the Falcon from below. One shot managed to clip the fuselage from the side, throwing Buck over the top of his turret. If it hadn't been for his chestplate, he would've had the wind knocked out of him. Nonetheless, the blast still hurt like hell and left his ears ringing as he hauled himself from his seat. To his dismay, the right turret was goneâ€"not even a stand was leftâ€"and the Grunts down below were reloading for another barrage.

Luckily, Noble Six knew how to coordinate fire while flying a tight formation. As Buck returned fire with his MA5C, a wide stream of tracers ripped the squad apart, registering as bright blue fountains through a storm of gray in his night vision.

"_We're clear for now! Nice shooting, Gunny!"_

Buck raised a brow beneath his helmet and looked down at his assault rifle with a quizzical glance. "Rightâ€|how much farther?"

"_Not much. Landing zone is in sight. Get ready for drop-off. As soon as we're over the landing pad, you're ass has gotta go. I can't stay in one place for long. Banshee's are gonna be swarming as soon as we reach open air."_

"Copy that."

Slapping a fresh magazine home, Buck positioned himself at the edge of the Falcon's cabin. Plasma bolts were starting to come back, buzzing around like an angry swarm of hornets. The Falcon swung in a hard yaw to return fire, strafing toward the target zone. Buck felt like he was hanging by a thread made from dim hope and blind optimism. He couldn't be more thankful for Noble Six to be flying with him and Vega. The combined accurate fire of the Spartan and his gun crew saved their asses more than once.

Buck used his legs to brace himself as Vega lowered the craft to a hover just three feet above the tower pad. Banshees were still closing in, whirring, howling as they entered tight turns for another strafing run. _"Ten seconds, Gunny! Go! Go! Go!"_

Without a moment's hesitation, Edward baled out, landing feet first on the flooded pad with a wet smack. He bolted for the door to Nomolos Tower while Vega made his ascent and broke formation. Noble Six was covering in a close orbit around the tower, each of his gunners warding off harassing Banshees. Those that came too close to the pad were cut down in seconds by autocannon fire, which sounded more like ambient rumbling under the screams from Vega's turboprop thrusters.

Buck stopped once he reached the door. He then turned around and gave a quick salute to Six's gunship as it circled around. "I owe you one, Spartanâ€|I'll see you in hell." With that, he about-faced and entered the tower.

There wasn't much else he could say to someone who essentially didn't exist, and odds were looking bleak for either of them living long enough to run into each other again in the land of the living. All he could do now was make sure that the Spartan's efforts weren't squandered.

All he could do now was find his team.

2. Chapter 2

Nomolos Tower

10 Minutes Until Extraction

Upon entry, Nomolos Tower seemed perfectly intact, albeit the pitch darkness due to a lost connection to the power grid as well as the structure's back-up generators. The twenty or thirty so paces that Buck took along the carpeted floor were probably the most comfortable steps he had taken since the op began. But as he delved deeper, the carefully crafted decor seemed to gradually morph into a motif of disarray and chaos.

Glass crunched beneath his boots as the bending corridor lead him closer to his team's beacon. Buck resented the sound. Normally he hated any noise that drew attention to his location, but the fact that he could hear something so subtle meant that there was nothing nearby to drown it out. Instead of nearing sounds of fire exchanging between his men and the Covvies, the Gunnery Sergeant was enveloped in the shadow of an unnerving and cryptic silence.

All that Buck could do was move on, blindly following his squad's transponder beacon, unsure of what to expect. He wasn't sure he wanted to think of the possibilities considering the risks, not to mention after how bad things sounded over the comm when they issued a distress call. For all he knew, he would soon be carrying out nothing but body bags—or even just dog tags if things really went to hell.

Buck rounded the corner of his current hall, coming face to door with what appeared to be a security room, the source of the squad's beacon. His HUD was now lined with a blue glow, the beacon pulse now chiming in long, steady intervals. He approached the door at an angle—"away from the center to avoid direct fire, friendly or otherwise. With a deep breath, he kept his rifle level in one hand, reached out with the other, and pressed the door's interface.

The door opened with a mechanical hiss and Buck slowly began to sidestep across its maw, weapon up and scanning every inch of the room. It was clear until he completed his first step, which left him in the center of the doorway and almost frozen with relief. He observed that two ODSTs—"out of his squad of five"—were present, both of which had their sights on him.

Buck identified the one in his more immediate line of sight as Corporal Rykov. "Chyort," he cursed, falling back on his Russian tongue as he lowered his weapon. He turned back and signaled the other to do the same.

Lance Corporal Trang, who was standing eight feet past Rykov, lowered the aim of his M90 CAWS to the floor. "You came alone?"

"Yeah," Buck said, taking a breath as he walked in and took stock of his present squad. Upon entry, he discovered one more of his squad, Private Mitchell, who was tending to his own wounds. His left shoulder piece was completely missing, no doubt removed. His chest plate was also patterned with burn marks, evidence of a close scuffle with plasma fire. "You guys okay?"

"Check," said Trang.

"Okay," Rykov added, covering the hall as his squad leader entered.

Buck turned his attention to Mitchell, having gotten no response. "Mitchell?"

"Little busy, Gunny."

"I can tell." He was done with the visual check and didn't need a roster to tell him that his squad was clearly smaller than before he sent a detachment to Nomolos Tower. "There were five of you last I remember."

"It's just us now," Rykov said. "We lost Noriko and Reyes on the way here."

"What happened?"

Trang chimed in, shifting his weight as he began to explain. "We found the jammer that was blocking communications on this part of Alexandria. Intel was actually right about that, but it overestimated their manpower."

"How so?"

"It was just Grunts and Jackals. No Brutes, no Elites. Without proper leadership they didn't put up much resistance and some of them scattered. It took a little while, but we cleared the room. But by that time hostile QRF arrived and was making its way down from the roof."

"We wouldn't have lasted long if we just set off the jammer then withdrew, so Noriko had the idea to cover our tracks by wiring up enough C12 to collapse the atrium. Then we would ambush whatever was left butâ€"

"Let me guess. The blast took the whole roof instead," Buck finished.

Trang replied with a half-hearted nod. That didn't seem right. Noriko wasn't green in the slightest sense when it came to explosives, Buck knew. And while C12 was one of the most unpredictably powerful explosive compounds the UNSC had to offer, she would have known better than to make that kind of mistake.

"We were compromised, and we started to pull back to our insertion point, that's when we put out the distress call. Noriko hung back to set up a mine, and Reyes stayed to cover her. After the detonation we

haven't heard anything."

"You didn't even check?" Buck was trying not to let the disappointment and hint of anger show in his tone.

Trang raised a hand as though to calm the Gunnery Sergeant. "Doc was injured. We couldn't leave him alone, and like I said, comms went totally silent."

Mitchell grimaced beneath his helm. He wasn't too fond of sympathy, and if he had his way, they would have gone back despite his injuries. Buck could see it in the way he looked up at him as he packed away his trauma kit that he was hanging on to some faith that his squadmates were still alive.

"That and everything beyond that door is unstable," Rykov said in defense. "We're between a rock and a hard place, Gunnery Sergeant, and both are collapsing beneath our feet."

Their actions were justifiable, Buck knew. He also knew what Rykov was implying, but he wasn't about to personally condone the decision to abandon Reyes and Noriko, neither were any of the present survivors. "No," Buck finally said after a brief moment of thought, warranting a couple of confused glances.

"Sir?"

"Alive or not, we don't leave people behind. You boys know this." He jerked his chin at the door to the atrium.

Mitchell pushed himself off the floor, wrestling his M7's strap with his good arm. "We're going in?"

Buck stopped him with a light palm to his vest. "We're going in. I need you to stay here and cover our exit. You're in no shape to tango right now."

The medic frowned. "Butâ€"

"'But' nothing. Keep our asses covered and watch the monitors for anything useful. I know you don't like it, but we need you here," he said, stabbing a finger at the floor for emphasis.

Shifting his weight, he curtly broke eye contact. "Reyes and Noriko might need medical."

"And we'll call you in when it's clear to provide." Frustration noted, Buck gave him time to let it sink in, then a little more to give an answer. Seconds passed. "You readin' me, Private?"

Mitchell lowered his head, glancing off to the side. "Yeah, I read you."

"Good." Buck brought his rifle back to battery and held it tight against his chest, turning back to face Trang, who was now formed up against the door with his M90 ready-low. "Everyone else lock it up tight. Let's get our people back."

[You ever feel like, when you procrastinate, that you've become something that you utterly hate? It's like all those times you've awaited something and it never comes, all those times you've bashed Valve for not understanding the meaning of "Episodic Game Titles" by making you wait year after year for the release of Half Life 3. And then, you slowly realize, all that waiting you've done is just because you wanted to get it right. Long story short, yeah, I'm about as bad as Valve. But as long as life is going on, I'll still be here, and I will see things through to the end however long it takes.]

[But you didn't come to read that. You came to read this, and while this final chapter isn't complete, it'll motivate my lazy ass to finish it.]

From the outside, everything from level 137 on up in Nomolos Tower looked disheveled and, for lack of a better term, a complete collapse waiting to happen. Buck hadn't forgotten the hellfire that had been spewing out of the building's insta-crete facade, the heat of which he and his team could already feel pushing against them, warming their Kevlar weaves as smoke obstructed their field of view. But compared to what the three had transitioned into, their previous holdout was looking much more appealing.

Panels from both the ceiling and the walls were strewn across the floor like littered garbage. The architecture had been rattled so violently from the detonation that the hallway's skin had just fallen off. Electrical wiring, insulation, and ventilation hung out like vines or entrails from some decayed metal beast as the trio navigated around them, weapons raised and scanning. The low-key lighting wasn't helping either, even with the few flickering emergency lights lining the floor. Their VISR displays were mapping lines around every conflicting surface that they could barely tell debris from splits in the floor. It seemed for a minute that they had stepped into a completely different building.

A sharp crack broke the silence, resonating from the rear of their formation. Buck swung around with his MA5 pointed at the floor but at the ready, only to find Rykov adjusting his footing and chiding himself as a dry panel slid across the floor, stopping just short of the Gunnery Sergeant's heel.

"Watch your step," he joked in a nonchalant tone before continuing on point.

End
file.